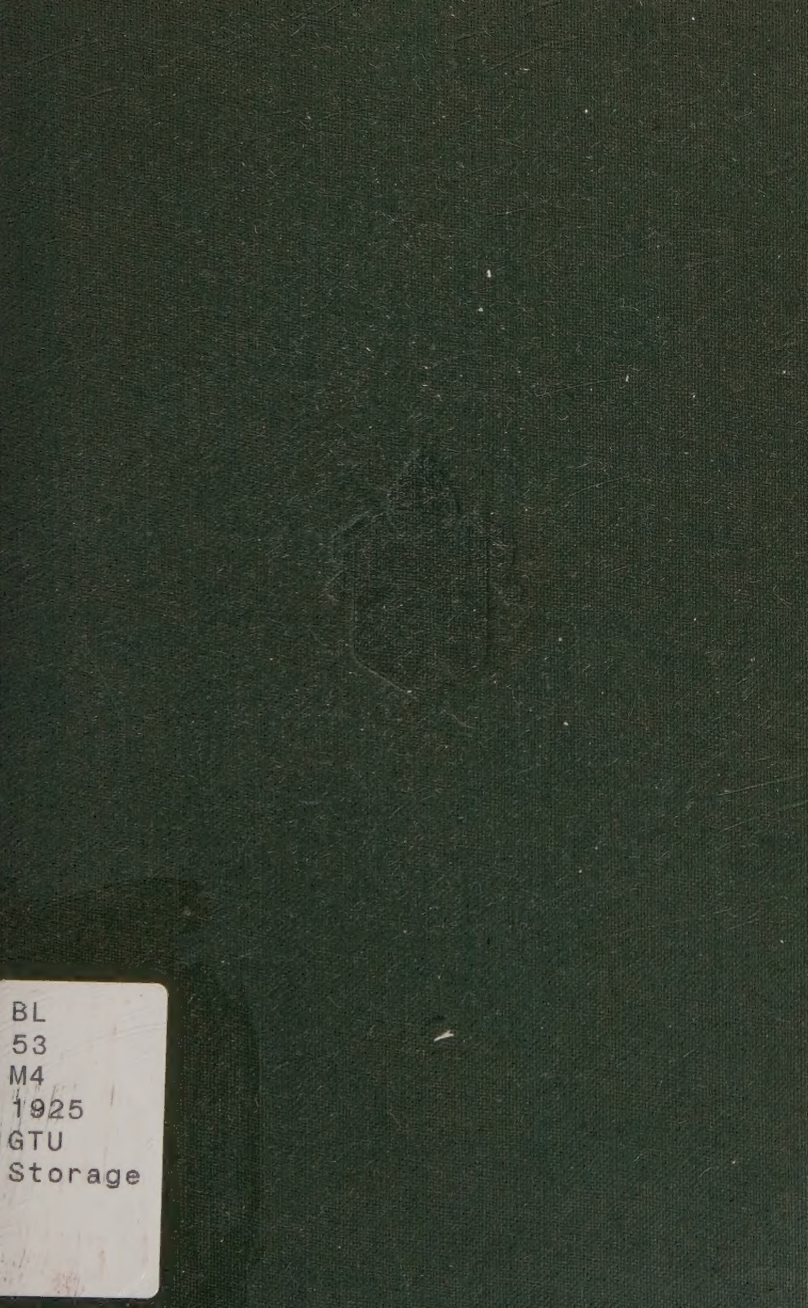
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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RELIGION

BY

THE REV. W. R. MATTHEWS, D.D.

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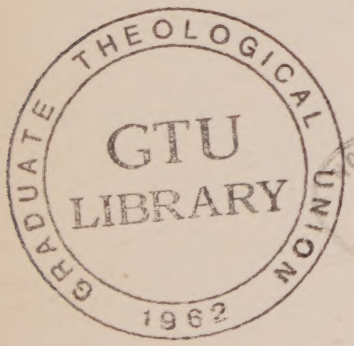

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LECTURE I

PSYCHOLOGY AND BELIEF IN GOD

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PSYCHOLOGY AND BELIEF IN GOD

THE lectures which I had the honour to deliver last year in Liverpool dealt with the subject of Revelation,* and we were led in the course of our argument to lay stress on the nature and importance of religious experience. There is some reason, therefore, for choosing the subject of the psychological approach to religion for the present series, apart from its intrinsic interest, for it is idle and misleading to fall back upon the religious experience of mankind as a basis for theology unless we are prepared to consider attentively what the psychologist has to say. Recently he has been saying

* *The Idea of Revelation*—Longmans

a great deal. Psychology, the youngest of the sciences, has been vindicating its right to a place in the hierarchy by throwing a flood of light on the nature of mind and mental processes. It would hardly be too much to say that the view which we are compelled to take of our psychical life has been transformed. If there is one general result which can be stated summarily it is that our estimate of the place of conscious reason has been profoundly modified. Though it is still possible to maintain that reason is, in a sense, the essence of mind, it has become increasingly clear that all mental activity, including reason, is based upon non-rational tendencies, that mind has an instinctive basis.

The study of psychology is clearly of immense importance for religion, both theoretically and practically. The new insight into how minds work must be relevant to the task of everyone who

wishes to influence his fellows. The advertiser and the politician have learnt from the psychologist, and the religious teacher would be foolish indeed if he refused aid from the same source. There are, moreover, some controverted questions of religious practice on which psychology may claim to have almost decisive weight. Auricular confession, for example, so long the battle-ground of theologians and amateur psychologists, can now be approached with some hope of scientific result. But the theoretical results of psychological enquiry are even more important, and it is with these that my lectures will be chiefly concerned. Anyone who moves among the more intelligent portions of the population must be aware of a widespread impression that psychology has "explained" religion, and explained it in such a way as to deprive it of all objective truth. We have often heard the remark that the theology of the

future must be based on psychology. Personally I do not believe that this is possible ; but it is at least certain that in many quarters the psychology of religion threatens to take the place not only of theology but of religious belief.

There is one general observation which ought to be made on this matter. Psychology is an " empirical " science. Its recent advance has been due to its success in claiming to be free from the tutelage of philosophy, and to base itself, like any other natural science, on the observation of phenomena. But, with the privileges of natural science, psychology must also acquire the limitations. These are more readily acknowledged than was formerly the case. It is becoming clear to reflective men of science that science cannot take the place of philosophy. The natural sciences must indeed throw valuable and indispensable light on the ultimate problems with which philosophy

deals, but they are not competent to provide an answer to them. In the 19th century many cherished the hope that metaphysics might be swallowed up in physics. In the 20th century we know that physics is far more likely to vanish in metaphysics. The science of psychology, therefore, since it is a science, cannot possess the last word on the questions of the nature of reality and the significance of life. It will provide data of transcendent importance; no metaphysic is worthy of a moment's attention which does not take account of the results of modern psychology; but we cannot short-circuit the problems of philosophy and theology through the empirical study of mind. The philosopher and the theologian will always be something different, and something more, than the psychologist.

I

I will now proceed to discuss very briefly the instinctive basis of the religious life. We have already remarked that psychology has shown that our mental processes rest upon a basis of instinct, and this general statement applies very clearly to the religious emotion. Yet the phrase so frequently used, "the religious instinct" is not accurate. The implication of the phrase, as popularly used, is probably that religion is not something artificial and strained, but something natural and elementary, native to the human spirit. As we shall see, this belief is confirmed by modern psychology; but in the strict sense we are not justified in speaking of the religious instinct. The nature of instinct is the subject of considerable controversy, and the debate has importance for the philosopher as well as for the psychologist. In the interesting speculations of M. Bergson, for example,

there is a gulf, and even an opposition, between instinct and intelligence which represent two alternative methods of adapting life to existence in an environment of matter. This view, however, is not held by most psychologists, the majority of whom would probably agree with Dr. McDougall that instinct and intelligence are not opposites but complementary, and that intelligence is always found in the service of the instincts. There is a further difference of standpoint to which we must refer. On the one hand, many psychologists give a long list of primary instincts in the human being, while, on the other hand, the psychoanalysts of the schools of Freud and Jung seem to consider the instinctive life as a unity which they describe under the name "Libido." It is at least agreed that the psychic energy which is available in any individual's life is derived from the instinctive basis of his personality. This,

however, does not mean that there can be no energetic striving for any objects except those that satisfy the natural and instinctive desires such as that of sex. This conclusion, which is sometimes ignorantly supposed to be the outcome of modern investigation, is disproved by the fact of what is called "sublimation." The word is used to denote the transference of the instinctive psychical energy to some object other than that which is its original one. Thus it is probably true that artistic creation and the appreciation of beauty are closely connected with the sex instinct; but it is very far from being true to say that aesthetic activity is nothing more than the sex instinct.

There is another and higher stage of the organization of emotion which is very important in the study of the religious consciousness. Since the important work of Mr. A. F. Shand on this subject it has become customary to distinguish between

emotion and "sentiment." A sentiment is "an organized system of emotional tendencies centred round the idea of an object." The sentiments are much more comprehensive and "rational" than the simple emotions. If we think of patriotism we shall see the difference. The man who has this sentiment is, to some extent, guided in his conduct by it and is, moreover, necessarily at a certain stage of intellectual development. Sentiments are concerned with action and involve some exercise of the intelligence. Above all they involve the idea of an object, which forms the centre or nucleus of the emotional tendencies. Thus patriotism cannot exist without the idea of the Fatherland, and the quality of the patriotism will depend upon the adequacy of the idea which the individual entertains of his country and its true destiny. It is obvious that religion is a sentiment of this kind. It is a system of emotional tendencies

affecting conduct and implying some rational thought, and it has, at least in its higher forms, the idea of an Object as its nucleus.

We can now see in what sense religion may be said to be instinctive. It is not itself an instinct, but a complex system of emotion and conation. Human emotions, however, do not spring into existence without antecedents. They emerge transformed from man's primitive instinctive life, and there can be no sentiment which is not, in some sense, instinctive. Religion, however, may claim to be instinctive in a more definite sense. The fact that, far more than patriotism, it appears to be a universal characteristic of human life must lead us to suppose that it is a natural, and perhaps inevitable, product of the human race. If this were true it would give us some ground for supposing that the religious attitude is not likely to disappear, though its intel-

lectual forms may be greatly modified. We cannot venture indeed to rest the question of the truth of religious belief here, since we must admit the possibility that the idea which forms the centre is an illusory one. We will turn, therefore, to consider what psychology has to say on this Object—on the idea of God.

II

The psychological approach to the belief in God will lead us to ask two questions : (*a*) What light can psychology throw on the origin of the idea ? (*b*) What are the causes of the development and continued influence of the idea ?

The first of our questions is one which can at best receive only a speculative answer, since it concerns the mental history of men who are incalculably removed from us both in time and capacity. Until quite recently the view which has been current on this subject is

that represented in various forms by Herbert Spencer, Tylor and Sir James Frazer, which may be called the "rationalist" hypothesis. According to this view, the earliest form of religious belief was "Animism" which denotes a vague conception of spirits resembling human spirits animating natural objects. Primitive man, it is thought, reached this conclusion by way of a brilliant though mistaken generalization. His experience in dreams led him to form the idea of a soul separable from the body of which it was the animating principle and which it left at death. It was not very difficult to extend this idea to explain the constantly moving nature in which man found himself. Thus the earliest conception of the supernatural was the result of the philosophical impulse to explain.

Recent years have seen a reaction against this view which seemed to attribute powers of thought and intellectual interest

to primitive man which there is no reason to credit him with possessing. Mr. R. R. Marett in his important work "The Threshold of Religion" argued for a pre-animistic stage of religious evolution, and suggested that its earliest springs were to be found in a feeling of awe in the presence of objects which appeared to possess unusual and dangerous powers. A thesis very much akin to this has been worked out in great detail by the German theologian Rudolph Otto in his famous book "das Heilige." Religion, according to Otto, is the child of a special capacity of the human mind, the capacity for experiencing an emotion which is best described by the word "awe." We must, Otto holds, recognize this emotion as being specifically different from mere terror or intellectual perplexity. It is aroused by contact with a reality which is mysterious and "non-rational." In this vague but characteristically human feeling

we must seek the germ of all religion. "It first begins to stir in the feeling of 'something uncanny,' 'eerie,' or 'weird.' It is this feeling which, emerging in the mind of primaeval man, forms the starting point for the entire religious development in history. Daemons and gods alike spring from this root, and all ostensible explanations of the origin of religion in terms of animism or magic or folk-psychology are doomed to wander astray and miss the real gist of their enquiry, unless they recognize this fact of our nature—primary, unique, underivable from anything else—to be the basic factor and the basic impulse underlying the entire process of religious evolution." ("The Idea of the Holy," p. 15.) In Otto's opinion the reality of the object which inspires this "numinous" feeling is not open to question. It is "a primary datum of consciousness"; the existence of a numinous object is given in the numinous experience.

To the present writer it appears that there are many points in Otto's theory which are open to grave dispute. In particular the persistence with which the object of religious reverence is described as the non-rational must cause anyone who cherishes a belief in the unity of the life of the spirit serious disquiet. It is curious that so many defenders of orthodoxy have welcomed Otto's non-rational numinous reality who would flee in horror from Spencer's " Unknowable." But the psychological part of the theory is probably far nearer the truth than the older rationalist doctrine, and we may accept Otto's description of the first elements of the religious consciousness as a real contribution to the subject. If we could also accept his view that the reality of the numinous object is " given " in the experience, we should save ourselves a great deal of trouble and render unnecessary all discussion of the existence of

God. But I confess that this seems to me quite an untenable position. Doubtless this "feeling of reality" exists, and it is not possible for the mind while experiencing the "numinous" to doubt that the object is real. But the number of objects which appear to be "given" in this way, in other words, the ideas of the divine which have entered into genuine religious experience, is immense and vastly various. We are not prepared, surely, to agree that all these objects are, in the full sense, real, and, if not, we are compelled to consider why and in what sense some of them are to be regarded as illusory. No amount of talk about the "feeling of reality" will deliver us from the task of reaching some rational criterion by which we may distinguish the kind of God who can really be held to exist from the conceptions of deity which must be denied reality.

III

We are thus naturally led to discuss in conclusion a theory put forward in the name of psychology which would deny all objective reality to the object of religion. It is said that the origin of the idea of God and its continued influence may be accounted for by the hypothesis that it is a projection of the human mind, of purely subjective birth and having no correspondence with a reality independent of human experience. In its general form this theory is no new thing. Any atheistic philosophy is evidently committed to some such view and must hold that the idea of God is created by the human consciousness. Recent psychology has pretended to make this general hypothesis more definite and to disclose the mechanism of "projection." Only a very summary account of the process which is alleged to take place can be attempted here. The mind, it is said, is constantly

attempting to escape from the realization of its own inner conflict and the sense of weakness and inferiority which arises therefrom. Two methods are employed in this endeavour—repression and projection. In repression the mind attempts to ignore altogether a part of its own content, such as desires which are distasteful to the higher intelligence. In projection the mind recognizes a part of its own content; but not as its own. It attributes these mental elements to some outside entity. This process may be seen at work in the idealization of other persons which takes place in hero worship. The hero is the personification of those elements in ourselves which we recognize as most valuable but which we are unable in our own lives to make dominant. The idea of God, it is argued, is a supreme case of projection. "In a primitive state of culture man projects parts of his own personality upon the face

of nature and thus personifies and sometimes deifies them." The advance from polytheism to monotheism may be explained by the need of the human self for unification, a need which cannot be satisfied by the creed of many gods. The theory of projection will also explain why the most diverse, and frequently almost irreconcilable, characteristics are attributed to God. All the ideal qualities of human nature, power, justice, love, are, it is supposed, perfectly realized in the divine Object. Dr. Jung and others have gone even further in the application of the idea of projection to religious belief, and have found in the religious myths of the world a dramatization of the inner conflict of man's soul.

The complete reply to this allegation would involve a discussion of the relation of mind to reality as a whole. Since that is beyond the scope of the present lectures, we must restrict ourselves to a

few comments on the theory. It is of the greatest moment to realize that religious belief has no interest in denying that the idea of God is a projection. What it has strenuously to combat is the doctrine that the idea is nothing more than a projection. It is obvious that the origin and the retention of the idea of God have mental causes. Regarded from the standpoint of psychology, the idea of God, like every other idea, is a projection. We may compare this idea with another which is closely allied—that of an orderly system of nature. It is clear that this is a projection, in that it is a concept formed by the mind for the purpose of satisfying one of the mind's needs—that of unity. There is, and there can be, no absolute proof that this idea is anything more than a projection, and it is impossible to refute the arguments of the sceptic on this subject ; but even the sceptic, in practice, assumes that there is really such an

orderly system. In the last resort, we accept this belief because it is necessary for life, it has "survival value," it enables us to control and adjust the environment in which we live. A similar claim may be made for the conception of God. The fact that, regarded from the psychological standpoint, the idea is a projection is no reason for holding that it is merely a projection. This idea, no less than the idea of nature, has value for life and has helped man to gain command of the circumstances in which his existence is cast.

We may, in conclusion, add one further reflexion. The researches of modern psychology which seem perhaps, at first sight, to have negative results so far as religion is concerned, have given us one conclusion which is of great value. As we have seen, the idea of God no longer appears as an artificial construction elaborated by the ingenious intellect. The idea

has deeper roots. It is the expression of a need which arises from the instinctive foundations of our life. To seek after God is, in a broad sense, an instinctive activity of man. Does it not seem probable that the universe which provides the objects to satisfy the physical cravings of man, should provide also the bread of Heaven for which his soul hungers ?

LECTURE II

PSYCHOLOGY AND CONVERSION

PSYCHOLOGY AND CONVERSION

If we take the word in a wide sense, conversion is a characteristic of all spiritual religions. In each of the higher faiths of the world there is some promise of power to raise minds become conscious of their own inferiority or impotence to a new level of quality and power. It may be argued with some force that the experience of conversion is peculiarly important in the Christian religion. It appears in the world with the message "Ye must be born again," and whatever may be said about its influence on the general history of mankind, it is certain that it has never been totally devoid of the witness of the Spirit in the shape of individual lives transformed. Conversion

is a psychical fact and consequently a phenomenon which is open to psychological analysis. It is not difficult to understand the feeling of those who would withdraw this most mysterious of spiritual experiences from the scrutiny of science as too sacred for such treatment. But it is too late to protest, for the psychologists have already been at work upon the subject, and we must believe that the knowledge which research may give about the mechanism of the process will, in the end, conduce to the greater good of religion, though we must confess that there is truth in the idea suggested in a story by Professor Jacks that the psychologist of religion is, perhaps, the last person who is likely to be converted.

Conversion may be roughly defined as one kind of transformation of the self. The person who has been converted, according to his own testimony, has been born again. This phenomenon, which

formerly seemed so anomalous, is now seen to be only the highest example of a process that extends throughout the whole life of the self. In this lecture I propose to consider transformation in the wide sense and, if possible, to show how religious conversion is related to these other and lower forms of transformation.

The New Psychology has given us the opportunity and imposed upon us the duty of seeking our starting point below the level of our conscious experience. Though we may not be prepared to accept the dogma of its more extreme adherents that all the contents of consciousness are determined by unconscious dispositions, we can hardly doubt that the processes of the submerged mind have a great influence on the events of the fully-conscious existence. It is, at any rate, in connexion with the unconscious that we first meet that conflict which is the precursor of transformation. It may be well to pause

here and ask what precisely is meant by the Unconscious? It must be said at once that the existence of the unconscious mind is a hypothesis which, in its nature, is incapable of direct confirmation. In this however, it resembles the atom, which, though it cannot be seen, nevertheless has a respectable status in reality.

The reason for supposing the unconscious to exist is that, without this supposition, it seems impossible to account for mental phenomena which do undoubtedly exist. It is not, however, easy to say precisely what is meant by the Unconscious. Dr. Beatrice Hinkle in her preface to Dr. Jung's book on the *Psychology of the Unconscious* says: "the term is used very loosely in Freudian psychology. It is a negative concept which can neither be defined nor described. To say that an idea or feeling is unconscious means to indicate that the individual is unaware at that time of its

existence, or that all the material of which he is unaware at a given time is unconscious." But we must observe that this very cautious statement does not correspond exactly to the usage of most writers on the subject, who prefer to keep the word "unconscious" to denote that which cannot be brought to consciousness by the volition of the individual, but, if at all, only by some special means.

We return now to the subject of conflict. In some form this is characteristic of all personal life. The natural instinctive propensities which furnish the energy of the psychical life are, as we have seen, at variance with the ideals and standards of conduct which the individual has consciously adopted. This tension between the "law in our members" and the "law of our mind" is not a rare and mystical condition, it is the normal state of human beings. The conflict may, however, take on a more extreme and

devastating character in which it enters the realm of mental disease. In these pathological cases there are unpleasant or disgusting memories which have been repressed into the unconscious where they are like wounds, forming the centres of "complexes." These so-called complexes form, as it were, a rival centre beneath the threshold. This underground nucleus draws off the emotional force of the instinctive life leaving the self impotent.

Both in the normal mind and in the diseased mind we find then the element of conflict. As we have seen, the attempt of the self to get rid of the division by ignoring it, by repression of the unwelcome impulses, leads to the definitely pathological state. Perhaps the most interesting discovery in mental therapeutics of recent years has been the healing power of self-knowledge. We may best describe the principle in the

words of one who did a great deal to define and apply it. "Where the morbid state," says Dr. Rivers, "depends upon some experience or tendency which lies within the region of the unconscious, self-knowledge as a therapeutic agency will consist in bringing the buried and unconscious experience to the surface. The unconscious experience has to be brought into relation with the general body of experience, which is readily accessible to consciousness, and so made part of it that it ceases to act as a separate force in conflict with the general body of conscious experience." (Rivers' "Medicine, Magic and Religion," p. 132.)

No one who has come into contact with the work of specialists in this field can doubt that the application of this principle of self-knowledge has proved of the utmost value. On this there is general agreement among those competent to judge. But there is grave difference of

conflict and the effort towards an integration of the self, an integration which can only be secured in some measure by the transformation of the self and the acquisition of new motives and a new direction.

The process which we have seen at work, through conflict to integration, is one which persists in different forms throughout the life of the individual. We owe to Dr. Maurice Nicoll and Dr. J. A. Hadfield the perception of the importance of that factor in any sane existence. Life divides itself into stages fairly well defined, such as infancy, childhood, adolescence, etc. Each one of these stages has its appropriate emotions and ambitions, and the passage from one to the other involves a conflict between the old and the new and a fresh integration and direction of the self. It seems to be well established that one cause of mental instability is the failure to effect the

necessary transformation, the inability to put away childish things, and it is plausibly suggested that some perplexing perversions such as autoerotism and homosexuality are due to the persistence of emotional tendencies from an earlier period of life. Here again, in the life-story of a normal man, we are presented with the same phenomenon and compelled to adopt the same formula : through conflict to integration, the transcending of division by transformation.

You will have been wondering long ago whether I was ever coming to the subject of conversion in the religious sense of the word. I do not think, however, that these remarks have been irrelevant if they have fulfilled their purpose, which was to show that conversion is not a phenomenon without kin; that, on the contrary, it is the highest and most interesting example of a process which exists at every level of human life. For

the phrase which we have used to cover the experiences which we have hitherto been discussing is precisely the phrase which would most aptly fit conversion—through conflict to integration. Only we must be careful to avoid confusion. When we are dealing with conversion we have left behind the dim region of the unconscious and the baneful influence of the complex, we are now in the higher regions of mind and are concerned with conscience, conscious motives and reason.

The psychology of religion has given more attention to the subject of conversion than to any other phase of the religious life, and the work of Wm. James and Professor Starbuck on this subject has opened up a new field of research. The idea of beginning with the study of the crisis in individual spiritual development was well inspired, since the religious life appears at these moments in, so to speak, a concentrated form, and the records

of such experiences are plentiful. We must, however, refer to a caution which has been put in by Professor J. B. Pratt, who points out that the studies of conversion have usually been based almost exlusively on records drawn from what we may call broadly the "Evangelical" tradition, while the experience of individuals trained in the "Catholic" tradition has been to some extent neglected. We must agree also, I think, with another acute remark of the same author on the influence of conventional expectation on religious experience. The course of the spiritual development of any given individual cannot be taken alone at its face value as independent evidence. We have to ask what part did suggestion play in this? How far was this person feeling what he had been taught he ought to feel?

In spite of the deductions which may have to be made on these and other grounds, it can be asserted that the

psychological study of conversion has reached some valuable and definite results.

Conversion appears to be very largely, though not entirely, a phenomenon of adolescence. At that period of life the self is presented suddenly with new powers both bodily and mental and with new responsibilities as a member of society. This mass of new material cannot easily be brought into harmony. The adolescent has to pass through a period of idealism, temptation and criticism. Thus there often arises a conscious division of the self and a conscious need for an integration. Conversion is the achievement of this integration in a more or less complete form. This brief description of the nature of conversion is perhaps sufficient to illustrate the necessity for most persons of some such experience. The continued division and conflict within the self cannot but be a source of weakness and instability even if it does not engender

definite mental trouble. There are many cases of the latter kind which would have been avoided by conversion in earlier life. The psychologist can at least support the preacher of the Gospel in the assertion that for many conversion is the only way from the City of Destruction. We must not be taken to imply that this conversion is always a definitely religious process. Cases are known to most of us where a person has found a satisfying object and life-purpose and has apparently felt no need to connect it with religious belief. Conversion is even possible in a direction away from belief, as is shown by the two famous cases of Ardigo and Harriet Martineau who went through an experience leading to peace and new direction of life on the occasion of definitely abandoning their former religious beliefs. We thus conclude that the essential element in conversion is the attainment of a unity of emotional and

volitional direction out of a state of disharmony and distraction.

This boon of unity may be achieved without any specifically religious agency or belief, but in the vast majority of cases conversion takes place as the result of a religious tradition and appears to depend upon religious belief.

We may profitably look a little more closely at the mechanism of conversion. Conversion, as we have seen it, is an episode, rather perhaps the crowning episode, in the struggle for true personality. It could not take place unless the moral self were already to some degree in being. What, we may ask, distinguishes the moral self from the psychical systems which are composed of simple reactions to stimulus from the environment? The characteristic of the moral self is best described as self-determination, determination from within. That is to say the moral personality directs its

actions with reference to purposes or ideals which it has itself formed.

Ideals and purposes, however, do not exist in the mental life in isolation; on the contrary, like everything else in the life of mind, they form associated groups for which the name "psychical constellation" has been suggested. Within the experience of one individual more than one "psychical constellation" may be functioning at the same time. When this occurs we have the condition of conflict in the realm of conscious life with the distress and loss of power which always accompany conflict. The decisive point in the development of the moral personality has now been reached. The whole future of the self depends on whether one, and that the highest, of the conflicting constellations, can gain the victory and become to a definite degree dominant. It is obvious that there are many degrees of victory, and it is probable

that conversion is never really complete. The "old Adam" has not entirely lost his power even in the saints.

Can we not see clearly enough the place of the preacher and evangelist? To many in our Church the title "Minister of the Gospel" is distasteful and appears to be of little account compared with "priest"; but there could be no higher function than that of helping the distracted self to the attainment of moral personality. The preaching of the Gospel does not mean the attempt to get results by suggestion or the illegitimate use of mass emotion. The so-called "conversions" which rely on these methods are unstable. The preaching of the Gospel is the presentation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, the holding up of the ideal of life that it may form the centre round which the personality of the struggling sinner may grow.

Wm. James has pointed out a feature

of many conversions which has considerable psychological interest. It is frequently observed that the experience of conversion is immediately preceded by a relaxation of the will. Not until the subject has abandoned the effort to reach the new character does the assurance that the new character has been attained come. From this arises much of the apparent suddenness of conversion ; but the position has, in fact, been prepared by the will, though the final crystallization does not occur until the tension is eased. From the theological point of view the explanation of this phenomenon has been that the work of grace cannot be completed until the sinner has abandoned all trust in his own efforts and has confided everything to the love and power of God. There is also a psychological reason for this phenomenon. We are often misled by the way in which the word "will" suggests to us a separate faculty or function of the self. But in fact

there is no such thing as the "pure will." The will is the expression of the "organized self," it is the self, so far as the self is a coherent unity, in action. Now the situation at the moment when conversion is about to take place is that the self in possession is on the point of being dispossessed. Another organized self, one centred round a different leading motive, is disputing the dominant place. Hence the exercise of the will, which must be the expression of the dominant system, will tend to preserve that domination. There is therefore sound psychological reason for the common evangelical exhortation to beware of supposing that the transformation of the self can be the work of the self.

An examination of the records of conversion which have been collected by the diligence of psychological investigators would go far to disprove the idea that all conversions are of the same type

or that there is any orthodox routine which must be followed. One of the besetting fallacies of religious teachers has been the tendency to take their own experience as normative for all mankind. We find, however, that even the sense of sin, which has been so prominent a feature in most Christian conversions, is not necessarily an element in the experience, its place being sometimes taken by a feeling of inferiority or impotence. Conversion again may affect primarily the intellectual outlook or the emotional disposition or the will. On the whole, we may say that "theological" conversions which represent mainly a change of belief are relatively unimportant. The conversions which are of permanent moment are those which leave the converted person with a new set of values and a new orientation of the affections. The converted man may change his theology without losing the direction

which the experience has given to his life.

This brief and imperfect survey has, I hope, indicated the naturalness of conversion. At every stage of the life of a person we encounter the struggle for unity, the need for release from conflict through a new integration of the elements which compose the material out of which the moral self has to be created. Conversion is the highest and crucial instance of this process. Though we must deplore the narrowness of view which has too often insisted that only one type of conversion is genuine, we must admit that evangelical religion has been profoundly right in finding some conversion to be the normal and necessary way of the spiritual life; and in most lives it is probably true that there is a determining point, a juncture where the ways divide, towards which it is possible to look back in after years as the time when the soul

began to be won. If I may be allowed a remark bearing directly upon the practical work of the parish priest, I would say that I have sometimes thought we in the Church of England miss our opportunities at the time of Confirmation because we are not definitely "out" for the conversion of the candidates. This would perhaps throw some light on the vexed question of the proper age for confirmation. If it is true that the period of adolescence is the normal time for conversion, it would seem clear that it is inadvisable to urge Confirmation before that period is well advanced.

It is possible that the psychological discussion of the phenomenon of conversion may raise in some minds the question whether it is not likely to weaken belief in the efficacy of divine power and grace. Will not a scientific explanation be the end of the religious explanation? It does indeed seem that the results of

psychology would make it more difficult to regard conversion as miraculous in the sense of having no natural causes. As we have seen, the experience of conversion is not incapable of being explained and brought into relation with known processes of mind. The supernatural is not, however, equivalent to the miraculous, and the devout mind will find it no difficulty that the supreme Life should seek its highest unity in personal spirits, not capriciously, but in ways that are in some degree intelligible to the mind of man.

LECTURE III

PSYCHOLOGY AND IMMORTALITY

PSYCHOLOGY AND IMMORTALITY

The belief in immortality has taken several forms which have, in many cases, little real connexion with one another. There is, in particular, a distinction frequently drawn between immortality and a future life. It is claimed that belief in immortality does not necessarily imply any belief in the survival of the individual after death. Thus the doctrine of the indestructibility of reason, as held, for example, by Aristotle and the doctrine that the values realized in the temporary life of the self are preserved in some impersonal manner have both been characterized as special doctrines of immortality. It is not the purpose of the present

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lecture to discuss the value of these beliefs or the legitimacy of their claim to be considered as ways of holding immortality; they are referred to in order to define the subject of the present discourse. What we shall be speaking of here is not these attenuated substitutes but the full doctrine as it has been held by ordinary men and has given them cause for hope and fear. That doctrine of immortality is quite simply defined though perhaps not so easily defended. It is that the shock of death does not destroy the self, that the personal life persists beyond the grave. We can hardly doubt that such a belief is a part of developed religion as it exists in civilized communities. Some investigators indeed have been inclined to hold that it is the most practically important of all religious beliefs, surpassing even the belief in God, and in this conclusion they seem to give some support to a gibe

of Heine's that most religious people would be content to do without God if they could be sure of Heaven without Him.

We are to discuss in this lecture the bearing of psychological research on this problem. It is unnecessary to repeat here the remark that psychology cannot determine the truth or falsity of the belief, and that the province of philosophy remains as the area in which the final battle must be fought. Nevertheless it is obvious that psychology must have a great deal to contribute to the discussion. The special points where discussions of a psychological kind arise are, I think, three :

(*a*) The psychologist may study the motives which appear to lead to the belief and to contribute to its continuance. He may seek the causes rather than the reasons of the belief.

(*b*) Psychology, though an empirical

science, cannot avoid adopting a view on the metaphysical question of the relation of mind to body. This is a problem which has a close connexion with the belief in immortality. If the results of psychology should tend to support the opinion that mind is completely dependent upon body, that mental life is inconceivable apart from the body, the belief in personal immortality would become difficult if not impossible.

(*c*) It would come within the province of psychology to investigate the alleged positive evidence for survival which is brought forward by spiritualists and others. On this subject lack of time, to say nothing of lack of knowledge, will prevent me from saying anything in this lecture.

I

The origin of the belief in a future life can be nothing more than a subject of speculation. If it is true that there appears to be a consensus on the subject of the supernatural, it is still more evident that some kind of doctrine of survival is a common possession of the human race. You will remember that when we were thinking of the origin of belief in God we had occasion to refer to the theory which we called "rationalist." A similar theory has held the field in respect to the doctrine of immortality. In this view the belief arises from the conception of a soul separable from the body, which is forced on the mind of primitive man by his dream experiences. Once this conception has been formed it provides an easy explanation of the dreams in which the dead appear, and so leads on to the further idea that at death the soul is separated from the body and survives

this separation. It appears to me that it is impossible to dispute that these explanations throw much light upon the formulations of the belief in immortality among primitive peoples as expressed in myth and ritual. Much the same objection, however, as we urged against the parallel theory with respect to belief in God may be urged with even greater force against this when it is put forward as a complete account of the motives which have led to the belief in a future life. It seems to be quite inadequate to account for the universal spread of the idea of immortality except on the unlikely hypothesis that the same long and complex train of reasoning should have occurred to men at many different times and places. The belief in life it seems is natural and belief in death acquired.

In these circumstances we may perhaps prefer the suggestion which may be derived from Otto's *das Heilige*. The

myths and theologies that have been developed on the theme of the future life have possibly been rationalizations of an immediate experience, an intuition of the mysterious greatness of the self of which the self becomes dimly cognizant in the first moment of conscious awareness.

If this suggestion were true we should have a valuable consensus on the subject of immortality. We should be able to adduce even the evidence of primitive races as supporting the belief in a future life, since the observances which relate to personal survival of death would be based, not on precarious and fallacious reasoning, but on a direct intuition of reality.*

We can refer to the reports by Prof. Pratt and others on the results of questionnaires for some light on the psychological causes for the continuance of the belief in modern civilized

* Article by present writer in Church Quarterly Review, April, 1924, *Consensus and Immortality*

communities. A considerable number of persons appear, like the savage, never to have questioned the truth of life after death; others when brought to the point base their belief on the authority either of Bible or Church. Among those who profess to found their conviction on some form of reasoning an impressive proportion appear to be influenced by the self-evident difference between mind and matter, others to lay the chief stress on the implications of religious experience. But a very considerable number of believers rest upon the consideration of the practical value of a belief in a future life. This, which in most minds is perhaps scarcely regarded as an argument, has been adopted by some more reflective intellects as a rational ground for the belief. I will give myself the pleasure of quoting Dr. A. Caldecott's statement of the position, which shows how the vague groping of the ordinary mind may be

adopted and clarified by the philosopher. "It is clear that conscious personality is entitled to take charge of our mind as a whole, and this includes the domination and direction of our feelings. We are not to accept all that offer themselves, nor in the precise volume in which they make their first appearance. But for us to be able to choose we must have an ideal before us. . . . In the working out of such an ideal we form the manifold of feelings into a system in which there is a positive class which have both inherent value and contributory efficacy, and a negative class which have minus values, subtracting from our life, but which are necessary as deterrents and warnings. But this latter class are of temporary and auxiliary value only, and as the soul progresses their office becomes less and less needful, while the others rightfully prolong themselves permanently. In the momentous choice between a future

life for spiritual personalities or their disappearance it is the feelings possessed of positive value, and the ideal system of these, which have the right to our allegiance, and I submit that no such ideal system can be constructed without the expectation of a future life."*

II

Whatever may be the practical advantages of a belief in the future life it would be nevertheless a belief which could not be held if the results of psychology were a definite proof of the complete dependence of mind upon body. If this were the true view it is clear that there could be no excuse for holding that the soul survived the dissolution of the body on which it depended. The view of common sense on this matter has been that there is

* Lecture on the Argument from the Emotions by A. Caldecott, in *King's College Lectures on Immortality*.

interaction between mind and body. It seems to the plain man to be a simple matter of experience that a thought or feeling may produce changes in his body and equally that bodily change may cause mental effects. The view of common sense, which in its philosophical form is called "interactionism," has not been popular either with philosophers or psychologists. The reason for this is that the common-sense view seems to raise difficulties of a very formidable kind. It is, for example, apparently impossible for us to conceive how two utterly different kinds of existence, such as mind and matter are assumed to be, can influence one another, or to see how an event in the one could be the cause of an event in the other. Still further, the common-sense view appears to violate a principle which has become dear to physical science—that of the Conservation of Energy. In its widest meaning this

axiom lays down that energy cannot be created : the sum of energy in the universe remains constant. Now if the interaction between mind and body is true it seems clearly to imply that mental agency introduces new physical energy into the material universe.

To escape this difficulty other views of the relations of mind and body have found favour with psychologists. The Materialist theory would cut the knot by making the events of mind entirely subservient to the processes of matter, representing, in fact, all thought and feeling and will as shadows cast by the material body. If this view were true we should have to disabuse our minds of the prejudice that any thought of ours could be the cause, or any part of the cause, of any event in the physical world or even of any event in our own minds. Causality would be confined to the physical side, and psychical causation would be a mere

superstition. It need not be demonstrated that on such an hypothesis immortality is completely excluded. The personal life of the individual could no more be supposed to continue after death than the shadow of the cloud upon the hill when the cloud has been dissipated.

Though there has been a reaction against this theory among psychologists, I think that it is wrong to say that it has been entirely abandoned or even that it may not still do good service. The vigorous Behaviourist school at the present day appears to occupy a position which is not far removed from that which we have called Materialist. There is, in fact, no need to deny that to take the bodily processes as the sole causal agent may be a useful method of investigation in many instances. But it is, at any rate, certain that this account of the matter cannot be finally true. This is easily seen when a few of the manifold absurdities to which

it would lead are reflected upon. It involves the conclusion that the world would be precisely the same as it is had there been no consciousness at all; that, for example, the written works of Shakespeare would have come into existence just as they did even had there been no thought in the mind of Shakespeare. It involves also a direct contradiction of the ordinary doctrine of evolution, because it implies that there is a quality, namely consciousness, which has been produced in the course of organic evolution, but which is of no use in the struggle for existence to those animals which possess it, since, by hypothesis, their actions would have been no different had the quality been entirely absent. It is really difficult to retain an adequately courteous demeanour towards people who can believe that such nonsense is the solution of the problem of body and mind.

The most fashionable theory among

psychologists is that of Parallelism. The view may take several forms but the leading conception of all is the same, to wit, that the series of mental and physical events move step by step with one another without any direct connexion, corresponding but not interacting. Thus to every mental event there corresponds a physical event and to every physical a mental. By this means it is hoped to escape the staggering paradoxes of materialism without encountering the difficulties of action by one kind of existence or another. The most receptive mind can hardly avoid a sentiment of surprise at the wonderful coincidence by which the two series so perfectly correspond, and the theory has frequently been supplemented by the hypothesis that both mental and physical series are co-ordinate aspects of one Reality. Into the details of these metaphysical speculations we must not now diverge. We

must ask, however, what consequences the parallelist theory would have for the belief in immortality.

It is usually assumed that the theory we have outlined would be difficult to reconcile with any doctrine of personal survival. There are obvious reasons for this opinion, since it would seem to follow that when the physical organism, or the nervous system, or the brain, ceases to function as a unity the coherent system of mental factors which we call personal life must also cease. I think, however, that this is by no means a certain deduction. Indeed, a kind of argument for immortality might be erected on the basis of the parellelist hypothesis. Let A. B. etc. represent events in the physical organism, and let X represent the complex event which we describe as the death of the body. Then the moments before the death of an individual may be symbolically represented as follows :

A——>B——>C——>D——>X, the arrows signifying that there is an observable causal connexion. There will be mental events corresponding to each of the physical events. Let us represent this series as α——>β——>γ——δ—>. Here again there is a causal connexion between the events of the series. But there is a difference between the two series of a remarkable kind. Whereas it is perfectly possible to see that certain conditions of the physical organism must be followed by its cessation to function as a unit, it is not possible to conceive any mental condition which must be followed by the disintegration of the psychical unity. In other words, the relation D——X is intelligible, whereas the relation δ—X is not. The true application of this argument is probably to indicate that parallelism is not a satisfactory theory of the relation of mind and body; but so far as it goes it may be used to show that if we

start with parallelism as a working hypothesis we may be led to a position in which immortality is not inconceivable.

There are signs that here as elsewhere the view of common sense is likely to be rehabilitated by philosophic reflexion. In a recent discussion of the problem in his book *Matter and Spirit* which has received too little attention, Prof. J. B. Pratt has reviewed the logical position of the three theories and comes to the conclusion that the interaction hypothesis raises fewer difficulties than any other. The two difficulties which have led psychologists to forsake it are not really conclusive. It is true that we cannot conceive how an event in mind can produce a change in matter, but it is also true that every type of causation is, in the same sense, inconceivable. As David Hume demonstrated long ago there is no reason, apart from experience, why causes and effects should be conjoined as they are. All

cause is mysterious. There is no more mystery in an act of volition causing an arm to be raised than in the fact that the arm if cut off will be caused by the attraction of the earth to fall to the ground. The second difficulty, that which arises from the principle of the conservation of energy, is due to the attempt to generalize an axiom, which has been successful in limited systems, so as to make it apply to the whole universe, taking for granted that it is a closed mechanical system. Obviously this is unproved and is, in fact, incapable of proof. There is nothing to prevent the adherent of interaction from boldly denying the truth of the principle of conservation when applied to the universe as a whole.

We can, therefore, see some ground for expecting that psychology will ultimately support the theory of interaction. It would be too much to say that it does so at present ; but we may at least claim

that the psychologist must allow interaction as a possible view. Immortality, though not perhaps irreconcilable with parallelism, would become much more plausible with the view of interaction ; for on this assumption we should be able to think of the brain, not as the cause of mind but as its instrument, and there would be no absurdity in supposing that the agent might survive the destruction of its tool if on other grounds that seemed probable.

III

There is one further problem on which a few words may be said, brief as they must be for so vast a subject. We speak of the immortality of the soul. In the conceptions of common sense and of the philosophy which is prior to Kant, soul was conceived as "thinking substance," and a favourite argument for immortality was founded on the supposed "simplicity"

of this thinking substance (by which was meant its indivisibility) from which it was deduced that the soul could not be disintegrated. The idea of soul as substance has almost vanished from psychology, and the attempt has been made to do without the thought of anything which could be regarded as equivalent to the old conception. It has been thought that experience could be adequately described without reference to any metaphysical entity. I am persuaded that this is an illusion. The fundamental truth about all conscious experience is that it is the experience of some centre. We may abstract from this and speak of willing, feeling, and knowing ; but we have no acquaintance with any such activities ; what we actually know is this self willing, feeling, and knowing. There is in all conscious experience the reference to the individual centre of experience and activity. This is the truth which lies at

the back of the old doctrine of the substantial soul.

Nevertheless, it is clearly not this bare and characterless subject of which we speak when we affirm the immortality of the soul. Though it is true that no self can exist apart from this centre, yet the self is that organized system of desires and ideals and emotions which has been created by the activity of the centre. There is, therefore, a genuine sense in which it is accurate to speak of degrees of selfhood or personality, since the coherent organization of which we speak may reach an indefinite number of degrees of completeness.

We touch here on the argument for immortality which to most minds will probably be the strongest. It is based upon the assumption that values will be conserved, that what possesses intrinsic importance will not be abolished, and it goes on to argue that values are essentially

personal, that without persons they have no meaning. The reliance on this argument has possibly contributed to the tendency to adopt a doctrine of "conditional immortality" which is noticeable among contemporary theologians; for it seems likely that a considerable proportion of the approximations to personality which have been developed have no value which could by a reasonable man be desired as a permanent element in the Universe. Of this speculation I will only say that it does not take account of the centre, which in my view, is the necessary nucleus of personality. To me it seems more likely that the acquisitions of the centre may be disintegrated—"straw, hay, stubble"—but the centre itself remain.

The questions into which we have now been led are plainly in the region of metaphysics; on them psychology can have no final voice. It must be confessed that the positive results of our enquiry

have been small. Anyone who expects the science of psychology to prove that the soul is immortal is destined to be disappointed ; but we have seen at least that psychology leaves the matter an open question. If it would be false to claim that psychology helps us to believe in a future life, it would be no less false to claim that it has made the belief impossible. We may " look if we cannot find some word of God which will more securely and safely carry us."

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